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ABSTRACT

Relations between older adults and their adult offspring have been of considerable interest to social gerontologists. This study was conducted to examine patterns of intergenerational interaction and contact in a community setting. Telephone interviews were conducted with 400 residents over the age of 60. Items in the interview were taken from either Caplow's Middletown III study (the Kinship Survey) or the Commission on Aging Survey, with some items being modified for use in a telephone survey. The results revealed that 335 of the 400 respondents had one or more living children, with 74.3% of that group having at least one child living within 50 miles of the respondent. The findings showed that respondents seemed to feel that they had sufficient levels of contact with offspring, friends, neighbors, and confidants. Widowed respondents saw their children more often than did married respondents. Most respondents indicated they were not lonely. Income, gender, having children, marital status, and amount of contact with a confidant appeared to play a role in varying degrees of loneliness. Respondents who felt a stronger obligation to maintain contact with their children, who received more advice from their children, and who lived farther from those progeny expressed somewhat higher levels of "Closeness" to offspring. (NB)

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PATTERNS OF INTERACTION WITH AND PERCEIVED CLOSENESS TO ADULT OFFSPRING BY OLDER ADULTS IN MIDDLETOWN, U. S. A.

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INTRODUCTION

Brody (1984) has accurately observed that relations between older adults and their adult offspring have been of considerable and enduring interest to social gerontologists. It may be that we continue to research this area because many professionals themselves, "down deep," cannot dismiss the cultural myth that most older people are unwanted, uncared-for, unloved, and tossed on the trashheap of life by callous and indifferent children. This is what Brody (1978) referred to as the Myth of Abandonment. In reacting to commentary about breakdown of the contemporary family and its impact on older adults, Sundstrom (1986, p. 370) notes, "One might even speculate on how much of these stereotypes are 'projections' of middle-class academics and journalists who themselves have experienced some of these distance-inducing mechanisms (and benefited from them), and therefore believe them to be characteristic of the lives of everybody else."

One of the many forms of intergenerational family relationship can be aid and assistance. Morgan (1983) points out that there is a great deal of empirical evidence which demonstrates a high level of family aid to older kin. Indeed, family aid and assistance often flows between generations in both directions.

It is a popular image that obligation evolves fundamentally out of affection in the family; adult offspring look after older parents because of the affection they feel toward those parents (Finley, et al., 1988). Finley also notes that this simplistic assumption is being challenged by some researchers, i.e. that a

sense of obligation is not always the simple consequence of feelings of affection.

The general focus of this paper is to examine patterns of intergenerational interaction and contact in a now classic community setting. We will focus on the subjective perceptions of family interaction, contact, and feelings of closeness to adult offspring as seen by older adults who reside in the social setting of Middletown, U. S. A.

Lyon comments that "classic," holistic studies such as the Lynds' Middletown represent a most significant body of research on community life. "No other body of community research is as widely read or cited as these attempts to describe all the interrelated parts of local life" (Lyon, 1987, p. 218). In their classic works, the Lynd's assumed that the things people do in the American city fall under one of the six following categories:

> 1. Getting a living; 2. making a home; 3. training the young; 4. using leisure in various forms of play, art, and so on; 5. engaging in religious practices; and 6. engaging in community activities.

While the classic and contemporary studies have examined many of these aspects of life in Middletown, very little attention, if any, has been devoted to the topic of growing older in that particular milieu. As noted, this paper examines a number of elements in the lives of older Middletowners and their relationships with their adult offspring.

BACKGROUND

Caplow comments on the community context of Middletown with regard to the social ambience of today as compared to the depression. He notes:

> Since then [the depression], 45 years have rolled on. The Great Depression is almost forgotten in Middletown; innumerable social shocks emanating from outside have shaken these quiet streets in the meantime.
>
> Happy are the people who have no history, says an old Chinese proverb.
>
> Middletown does not make its own history but patiently suffers history made from the outside.
>
> (Caplow, 1982, pp. 4-5)

Caplow contends that, "The general lifestyle of family life has hardly changed at all since 1925," although the number of churches has risen faster than the population, and church attendance is higher as well (Caplow, 1982, p. 29).

With regard to family life, a number of Caplow's observations have bearing. Caplow notes that around 85 percent of urban adults in Adam's 1968 study kept in touch with parents; both face-to-face and phone contact was an obligation. Middletowners agreed; obligation to parents and sibs was affirmed. Obligations to sibs were less important than to parents and only parents or grown children are owed material assistance. Parents and adult children are mutually obligated to provide help if necessary (and possible).

Almost every older adult who had a living child sees them at least once a year. Those adult offspring who had parents who lived in Middletown or within an hour's drive saw their parents

every week. Financial assistance flows both ways (but most usually from parents to offspring). The majority of those with living parents "idealized" one or both. A belated emotional debt is owed to one's parents, to put it bluntly (Caplow, 1982, pp. 197-288).

In commenting on social trends, Caplow asserts, "Indeed, several recent changes in the national population appear in bolder relief in Middletown than in the country at large. Among the more important of these are the aging and 'feminization' of the population (p. 41). However, the former significant social change has received little focused attention in the past.

It is in this community context that we will examine the elderly in Middletown to ascertain how they, as a specific segment of the population, conform to some of the observations made by Caplow and others. We will have to make some hopefully reasonable inferences in that the study from which the data were derived was not intended as a complete replication of the Middletown III research, within the context of aging. The background for this research will be briefly discussed in the following section.

METHODOLOGY

The data were obtained from 400 telephone interviews with respondents who were 60 or older (for those interested in the relative merits of different interview approaches, see Leinbach, 1982). A "Middletown Area Survey" is conducted annually by the Department of Sociology at Ball State University. The sample was selected by computer, utilizing a program which chooses phone

numbers based on the proportion of exchanges and blocks which are in service throughout the Muncie/Delaware County area. This comprises the boundaries of contemporary Middletown.

Once contact was made with a household, a filter item was asked to determine if anyone in that household was 60 years of age or older. If an older adult was present, we proceeded to conduct the interview. If not, the ineligible respondent was thanked for their time and inconvenience, and the next number on the list was then called.

A number of the items in the instrument were taken from either Caplow's Middletown III study (the Kinship Survey) or the Commission on Aging Survey, a complete copy of which may be found in Babbie (1986). Some of the items were slightly modified for use in a telephone survey. The final instrument was subjected to a pilot test before the data collection process was begun. The general characteristics of the sample are seen in Table 1.

(Insert Table 1 Here)

OBSERVATIONS

How do these older adults evaluate their levels of interaction with family, friends, and neighbors? Is there a pervasive sense of loneliness abroad in the land?

In this sample, 83.7 percent (335 of the 400 respondents) indicated having one or more living children. It is also of interest that 74.3 percent of that group have at least one child who lives within 50 miles of Middletown (this includes those who reside in the Muncie/Delaware County area).

Table 2 shows the frequency contact with offspring over the last two years.

(Insert Table 2 Here)

About 65 percent of older Middletowners with at least one living child, see an offspring at least once a week; some 99.7 percent see an adult child at least once a year (about 86.0 percent of the sample talk on the phone with an adult child several times a month or more). Both of these findings tend to support Caplow's observations. There appears to be a relatively high level of interaction between older Middletowners and their progeny. Contact or interaction is one thing; how does one feel about that contact or interaction?

The data in Table 3 indicates that 40.8 percent of the respondents feel that they see their children "just often enough." Some 53.0 percent would like to see them "a little more" or "much more often." A meager 3.0 percent fall into one of the "less often" categories.

(Insert Table 3 Here)

Types of assistance provided by older adults to adult offspring are found in Table 4a. Since the time frame specified covers two years (as did Caplow), the "Never" column may hold the most interest for us. About 32 percent claim that they have never given any advice to their adult children over the two year period; 50 percent no "help"; over 50 percent no financial assistance; 49 percent no baby-sitting; and almost 60 percent no "handwork" type activities.

(Insert Table 4a Here)

In terms of receiving help from adult children over the last two years, about 42 percent had not received advice; almost 44 percent had not had help in the home or yard; nearly 61 percent had not needed medical transportation or help; and around 85 percent had not received any financial assistance. Both parents and children are gift givers it seems.

(Insert Table 4b Here)

From the data in Table 5, three areas of mutual activities stand out in the "Never" column. Most (64 percent) never attend the same church or religious meetings as do their offspring: Many of those offspring do live in other communities. Some 46 percent have not dealt with any emergency, and over 37 percent never shop with their children.

(Insert Table 5 Here)

What are the reasons that these older adults keep in touch with their kids? Table 6 indicates that while obligation and mutual help needs play a role, by far and away, most state that they simply enjoy it (95 percent said this was "Very Important").

(Insert Table 6 Here)

In Table 7, we see that 26 percent of the sample feel closer to their adult offspring than they did when those children were growing up; over 48 percent feel the same; and almost 26 percent don't feel as close.

(Insert Table 7 Here)

With regard to other types of contact, we see in Table 8 that almost 79.0 percent of those responding indicate that they visit in person with a friend or neighbor at least once a week.

(Insert Table 8 Here)

The responses shown in Table 9 show that a vast majority (76.0 percent) of older Middletowners have contact with someone they trust or in whom they can confide.

(Insert Table 9 Here)

Does life in general inflict a pervasive sense of loneliness upon our subjects? The data in Table 10 would say "no." When asked how often they feel lonely, 59.0 percent responded "never or hardly ever," about 17.0 percent said "fairly often," "very often or always."

(Insert Table 10 Here)

If we refer back to Table 3, we may note that about 68 percent of the respondents say that they see their children just often enough or would like to see them a little more often; about 65 percent have contact with a child at least once a week. Neither age, sex, or household income of the respondent was related to frequency of contact or desire to see those offspring.

Caplow observed that those children whose parents lived in Middletown or within an hour's drive saw them at least every week. It is interesting to note that there is a statistically significant difference in frequency of contact and whether or not offspring live more than 50 miles from the city and/or county. Also, those whose children live more than 50 miles away express significantly higher levels of desire to see offspring. Geographical proximity appears to have an effect on both contact and level of wishing to see offspring.

Marital status is significantly different on contact; some 61.0 percent of those who are married see their offspring at least once a week compared to 74.0 percent who are widowed. (Marital status does not seem to have any significant difference on desire to see offspring.) With regard to loneliness, it may be of interest that neither contact nor desire for contact with children yielded statistically significant differences.

However, those who have more income are significantly less lonely; men indicate less loneliness than women; those who have children are less lonely than those who do not; and those who are married are less lonely than those who are widowed or separated, divorced or never married. Those who feel that they do not have sufficient contact with someone they trust or a confidant are more lonely.

One of our main objectives was to determine those variables which may account for varying degrees of feelings of "Closeness" with regard to one's children. A multiple regression approach was utilized to make this assessment. It is interesting to note that none of the traditional background variables (age, income, sex, education, or marital status) were related to "Closeness."

In addition, health, number of children, frequency of contact with children, contact by telephone, desire to see children, and loneliness were in no way related to the "Closeness" variable. Three variables emerged out of the multiple regression analysis which were to some extent related to "Closeness" (see Table 11); they are: Distance From Children,

Obligation to Keep in Touch With Children, and Receiving Advice From Children.

(Insert Table 11 Here)

It appears that those parents who feel a strong obligation to keep in touch, who receive advice from their children, and who live farther from their children express somewhat stronger feelings of "Closeness."

SUMMARY

In the main, these older Middletowners seem to feel that they have sufficient levels of contact with offspring, friends, neighbors, and confidants. Those who have children living within the Middletown area or within 50 miles of Middletown see those offspring more often. Those who are widowed see the kids more often than those who are married.

Most of the respondents indicated that they were not lonely. However, income, sex, having children, marital status, and amount of contact with a confidant play a role in the varying degree of loneliness. With regard to feelings of "Closeness" to offspring, the three variables which displayed a limited association dealt with 1) Obligation to Keep in Touch, 2) Receipt of Advice From Offspring, and 3) Distance From Children. Those who feel a stronger obligation to maintain contact, who receive more advice from their kids, and who live farther from those progeny express somewhat higher levels of "Closeness."

It may be that maintaining contact is one of those significant, culturally appropriate, parental "Oughts" which makes one feel that the bonds are indeed stronger. The fact that

one's children care enough to give advice may enhance feelings of "Closeness"; that one's children are concerned enough to proffer advice, guidance, and direction indicates that they still have considerable concern for one's well-being. Geographical distance may make a sense of "Closeness" stand out in bold relief by promoting the emotion and feeling that absence makes the heart grow fonder. It may be, as Moss noted (1985), that other evidence indicates that the quality of parent-child relationships is not related to amount of contact and that affective ties are maintained, regardless of distance.

Admittedly, an R = .255 leaves a tremendous amount of variance to be explained. It may be that this study did not include sufficient measures of more subtle social-psychological measures of interpersonal feelings and dynamics of older parent/adult child relationships. While we used a slight modification of Caplow's measure of "Closeness," that measure may be too simplistic (although such items tend to be very direct and to the point). The reader should be reminded that this sample is composed of non-institutionalized, older adults, most of whom live in their own home (only 6 of the 335 respondents live with their children). Thus, we may be missing a number of important dimensions of "Closeness" that might emerge if the sample had included those who are the more dependent segments of the older population and who have needs which are different from those whom we studied. These represent relevant possibilities and concerns for additional research in this general area of interest.

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Table 1: Background Characteristics of the Sample

MARITAL STATUS

	N	Percent
Married	211	52.8
Widowed	145	36.3
Separated/Divorced	31	7.8
Never Married	13	3.3
TOTAL	400	100.0

AGE OF RESPONDENT

65-69	121	30.5
60-64	103	25.9
70-74	72	18.1
75-79	59	14.9
80-84	30	7.6
85 and over	12	3.0
TOTAL	397	100.0

LEVEL OF EDUCATION

No High School	65	16.3
Some High School	87	21.9
H.S. Grad/Trade Sh	152	38.2
Some College	26	6.5
College Grad or More	68	17.1
TOTAL	398	100.0

NUMBER OF LIVING CHILDREN

	N	Percent
None	65	16.3
One	66	16.5
Two	93	23.3
Three	78	19.5
Four	43	10.8
Five	17	4.3
Six	19	4.8
Seven or more	19	4.8
TOTAL	400	100.0

SEX OF RESPONDENT

Male	133	33.3
Female	267	66.8
TOTAL	400	100.0

HOUSEHOLD INCOME

$0-4,999	42	13.0
$5,000-9,999	96	29.6
$10,000-14,999	55	17.0
$15,000-19,999	35	10.8
$20,000 and over	96	29.6
TOTAL	324	100.0

Table 2: Frequency of Contact With Offspring Over the Last Two Years

	N	Percent
Everyday	75	22.4
More Than Once a Week	86	25.8
Once a week	56	16.7
Several Times a Year	88	26.3
About Once a Year	22	6.6
Less than Once a Year	7	2.1
Never	1	.3
TOTAL	335	

Table 3: Does Respondent Want to See Adult Children More or Less Often

	N	Percent
Much More Often	98	29.4
A Little More Often	89	26.7
Just Often Enough	136	40.8
A Little Less Often	4	1.2
Much Less Often	6	1.8
TOTAL	333	

Table 4a: In the past two years or so, how often have you given the following kinds of help to any of your adult children?

	Once a week or more		More than once a month		Several times a year		Once or twice		Never		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	Total
Advice on a decision they had to make. Was it:	13	3.9	23	6.9	79	23.6	114	34.0	106	31.6	335
Help on special occasions, such as childbirth, sickness. Was it:	4	1.2	6	1.8	49	14.6	108	32.2	168	50.1	335
Financial assistance, such as money or a loan. Was it:	8	2.4	12	3.6	45	13.5	81	24.3	187	56.2	333
Babysitting for grandchildren. Was it:	27	8.1	38	11.4	55	16.5	49	14.7	164	49.2	333
Gifts. Was it:	1	0.3	13	3.9	193	58.5	85	25.8	38	11.5	330
Hand work, such as gardening, sewing, yard work. Was it:	12	3.6	13	3.9	61	18.3	51	15.3	196	58.9	333

Table 4b: In the past two years or so, how often have any of your adult children given you help in the following ways?

	Once a week or more		More than once a month		Several times a year		Once or twice		Never		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	Total
Advice on a decision you had to make. Was it:	5	1.5	12	3.6	72	21.6	106	31.7	139	41.6	334
Help in your home or yard. Was it:	25	7.5	33	9.9	69	20.6	62	18.5	146	43.6	335
Taking you to the doctor, or caring for you when sick. Was it:	8	2.4	16	4.8	44	13.2	64	19.2	202	60.5	334
Financial Assistance, such as money or a loan. Was it:	8	2.4	12	3.6	45	13.5	81	24.3	187	56.2	333
Gifts. Was it:	2	0.6	3	0.9	219	65.4	78	23.3	33	9.9	335

Table 5: In the past two years or so, about how often have you and any of your adult children engaged in the following types of activities together?

	Once a week or more		More than once a month		Several times a year		Once or twice		Never		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	Total
Recreational activities, such as movies, picnics, card playing, camping. Was it. . .	21	6.3	40	11.9	110	32.8	78	23.8	86	25.7	335
Brief drop-in visits for conversation. Was it. . .	136	40.7	54	16.2	54	16.2	31	9.3	59	17.7	334
Family get-togethers, such as reunions, birthdays, or Christmas. Was it. . .	7	2.1	18	5.4	225	67.4	65	19.5	19	5.7	334
Attending the same church or religious meeting. Was it. . .	43	13.0	14	4.2	28	8.4	34	10.2	213	64.2	332
Shopping together. Was it:	24	7.2	36	10.8	71	21.3	78	23.4	125	37.4	334
Emergencies of any sort. (sickness, death, etc.) Was it. . .	4	1.2	3	0.9	53	15.9	122	36.5	152	45.5	334

Table 6: Here are some possible reasons you might have for keeping in touch with your child(ren). For instance. . .

	Very Important		Somewhat Important		Not Important		Total
	N	%	N	%	N	%	
You have an obligation to keep in touch with them. Is this. . .	166	49.6	99	29.6	70	20.9	335
You need their help in some way. Is this. . .	84	25.1	117	35.0	133	39.8	334
They need your help in some way. Is this. . .	100	30.0	136	40.8	97	29.1	333
You simply enjoy keeping in touch. Is this. . .	318	94.9	16	4.8	1	0.3	335

Table 7: Would You Say that You Feel Closer to Your Adult Children Now Than You Did When They Were Growing Up or Not as Close?

	N	Percent
Feel Closer to Them	85	26.2
Feel About the Same	157	48.3
Don't Feel as Close	83	25.5
TOTAL	325	

Table 8: How Often Did Respondent Visit In Person With Friends or Neighbors Last Week?

	N	Percent
Everyday	67	16.8
A Few Times a Week	194	48.6
Once a Week	53	13.3
Not At All	85	21.3
TOTAL	399	

Table 9: Does Respondent Have as Much Contact As They Wish With Someone They Trust or Confide In?

	N	Percent
Yes	299	75.5
No	97	24.5
TOTAL	396	

Table 10: How Often Does Respondent Find Themselves Feeling Lonely?

	N	Percent
Never or Hardly Ever	236	59.3
Sometimes	94	23.6
Fairly Often	28	7.0
Very Often or Always	40	10.1
TOTAL	398	

Table 11: Multiple Regression Analysis of Perceived Closeness to Adult Offspring

Variable	Beta	F	SIG
Distance from Children	.122	4.97	<.05>.01
Obligation To Keep in Touch With Children	.165	9.25	<.01>.001
Receiving Advice From Children	.160	8.61	<.01>.001

$R = .255$ $R^2 = .065$